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Why we remember Lincoln

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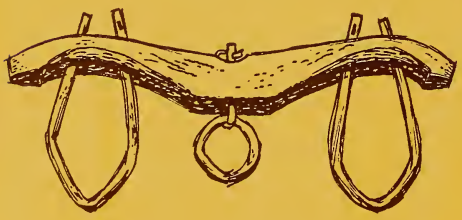

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Why We Remember Lincoln

by

JOSEPH DAVIS

of the Chicago Bar

An address delivered before
the Illinois Committee of The
Chicago Association of Commerce
at the La Salle Hotel, Chicago, Ill.
February 12, 1942

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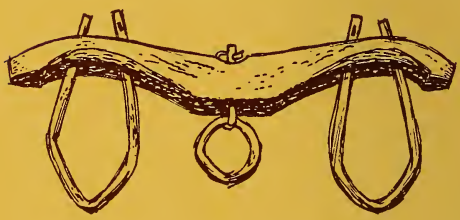

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Why We Remember Lincoln

By Joseph Davis

History plays queer tricks on men. What books will survive? What plays will be remembered? What poems are to be immortal? What men shall live in memory? No contemporary can ever tell. No historian can project the answer. No dictator can force this issue. Only survival in the hearts and minds of men can determine the result.

When we look backward down the impressive avenue of a century and a half of United States history, from the enlarged present to the distant past, we behold the monuments of men who have marked the road of American destiny. Far down the corridors of time, at the converging apex of this country's yesterdays, the figure of Washington, Father of his country, stands as a benediction to all the days to come. There follows an imposing array of heroes, the great and the near great, the remembered and the forgotten.

Yet in the hearts and minds of the American people there is no doubt, no question, no unsureness as to which American of our historic past is most revered by them. Abraham Lincoln is the most beloved and cherished of our national heroes. Why should this be so?

When scientists desire to find a rule or law of nature, they apply endless tests. Evenutally by a process of elimination they deduce unfailing principles. Can we not then by a scientific approach find some rules—some universal laws—which will determine for us the reason for Lincoln's immortality in the memory of man?

In doing so let us eschew an indirect approach. Let us hold to no hearsay evidence. If we had never read one of the countless books that have been written on the life of Abraham Lincoln, if there had never been transmitted to us a single syllable of praise or criticism from his contemporaries—what would our picture and evaluation of Lincoln be? Let us turn an unbiased gaze upon his own words—and with-

out any preconception of greatness, without any prejudice of censure, exercise for ourselves the right of direct examination, and endeavor to determine why his memory lives on.

We are in the midst of a great war. Such times have always produced soldiers and generals of note. In the annals of history we see statues and monuments to such men. Is military genius then one of the reasons for the perpetuity of Lincoln's name?

You can best draw your own conclusion as to Lincoln's military attributes by studying the conduct of the Civil War and his part in it. It may be illustrative, however, to call attention to his communicatons with some of his generals. There was, for example, McClellan who early in the Civil War was in charge of the army of the Potomac. McClellan never felt he had enough of anything and continually pleaded for reinforcements of all kinds. Lincoln constantly admonished him to use what forces he had. Here are a few excerpts from Lincoln's reply to McClellan of April 9, 1862:

"My Dear Sir:—

"Your despatches, complaining that you are not properly sustained, while they do not offend me, do pain me very much.

* * *

"By delay the enemy will relatively gain upon you—that is, he will gain faster by fortifications and reinforcements than you can by reinforcements alone.

"And once more let me tell you it is indispensable to you that you strike a blow.

* * *

"I beg to assure you that I have never written you or spoken to you in greater kindness of feeling than now, nor with a fuller purpose to sustain you, so far as in my most anxious judgment I consistently can; but you must act."

Again on July 2nd Lincoln advised McClellan:

" * * If, * * you have the impression that I

blame you for not doing more than you can, please be relieved of such impression. I only beg that in like manner you will not ask impossibilities of me. * * "

In mid-October in the midst of a lengthy dispatch, Lincoln asked:

" * * Are you not over-cautious when you assume that you cannot do what the enemy is constantly doing? * * "

And on October 24th Lincoln wired McClellan:

"I have just read your despatch about sore-tongued and fatigued horses. Will you pardon me for asking what the horses of your army have done since the battle of Antietam that fatigues anything?"

However, when the public criticized McClellan, Lincoln took occasion to allay disparagement. At a meeting on August 6, 1862 Lincoln referred to the quarrel which was said to be brewing between General McClellan and the Secretary of War, and said:

"Now, I occupy a position that enables me to believe that these two gentlemen are not nearly so deep in the quarrel as some presuming to be their friends. General McClellan's attitude is such that in the very selfishness of his nature he cannot but wish to be successful —and I hope he will—and the Secretary of War is precisely in the same situation. If the military commanders in the field canot be successful, not only the Secretary of War, but myself, for the time being the master of both, cannot but be failures. * * General McClellan is not to blame for asking for what he wanted and needed, and the Secretary of War is not to blame for not giving when he had none to give."

Lincoln finally removed McClellan on November 24, 1862 but in writing to Carl Schurz at the end of that month he stated:

" * * I certainly have been dissatisfied with the slowness of Buell and McClellan; but be-

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fore I relieved them I had great fears I should not find successors to them who would do better; and I am sorry to add that I have seen little since to relieve those fears."

McClellan's successor, General Burnside, likewise proved himself incompetent and was removed, and on January 26, 1863 the dashing General Hooker was put in his stead. Here is the famous executive order giving him his command:

"General:—I have placed you at the head of the Army of the Potomac. Of course I have done this upon what appear to me to be sufficient reasons, and yet I think it best for you to know that there are some things in regard to which I am not quite satisfied with you. I believe you to be a brave and skillful soldier, which of course I like. I also believe you do not mix politics with your profession, in which you are right. You have confidence in yourself, which is a valuable if not an indispensable quality. You are ambitious, which within reasonable bounds does good rather than harm; but I think that during General Burnside's command of the army you have taken counsel of your ambition and thwarted him as much as you could, in which you did a great wrong to the country and to a most meritorious and honorable brother officer. I have heard, in such a way as to believe it, of your recently saying that both the army and the government needed a dictator. Of course it was not for this, but in spite of it, that I have given you the command. Only those generals who gain successes can set up dictators. What I now ask of you is military success, and I will risk the dictatorship. * * And now beware of rashness. Beware of rashness, but with energy and sleepless vigilance go forward and give us victories."

The orders and directions to his various generals indicate Lincoln's perception and understanding of men. The conservative he prodded to action. On the reckless he impressed restraint. With infinite forbearance, he sustained

to the utmost, imperfect leaders until more perfect ones could be found.

At length, as you know, Grant captured Vicksburg. Quickly Lincoln comprehended his ability. Here is Lincoln's dispatch of July 13, 1863:

"General Grant:

"My dear General:—I do not remember that you and I ever met personally. I write this now as a grateful acknowledgement of the almost inestimable service you have done the country. I write to say a word further. * * When you * * took Port Gibson, Grand Gulf, and vicinity, I thought you should go down the river and join General Banks; and when you turned northward, east of the Big Black, I feared it was a mistake. I now wish to make the personal acknowledgement that you were right and I was wrong."

On July 27th, in communicating with Major General Burnside, Lincoln said:

"Let me explain. In General Grant's first despatch after the fall of Vicksburg, he said, among other things, he would send the ninth Corps to you. Thinking it would be pleasant to you, I asked the Secretary of War to telegraph you the news. For some reasons never mentioned to us by General Grant, they have not been sent * *. General Grant is a copious worker and fighter, but a very meagre writer or telegrapher. No doubt he changed his purpose in regard to the Ninth Corps for some sufficient reason, but has forgotten to notify us of it."

Having found the military genius for whom he had been searching, Lincoln wasted no time in suggestions or detailed orders. Under date of April 30, 1864 he advised Grant as follows:

"Not expecting to see you before the spring campaign opens, I wish to express in this way my entire satisfaction with what you have done up to this time, so far as I understand it.

"The particulars of your plans I neither know nor seek to know. You are vigilant and self-

reliant; and, pleased with this, I wish not to obtrude any restraints or constraints upon you. While I am very anxious that any great disaster or capture of our men in great number shall be avoided, I know that these points are less likely to escape your attention than they would be mine. If there be anything wanting which is within my power to give, do not fail to let me know it.

"And now, with a brave army and a just cause, may God sustain you."

Yet Lincoln did not fail to forsee nor hesitate to forestall the possibility of a successful General overstepping his limitations. Grant, the victor, and Lee, the vanquished, were about to meet. On March 3rd, 1865 Lincoln had the Secretary of War advise Grant that in his conference with General Lee: "* * you are not to decide, discuss, or confer upon any political question. Such questions the President holds in his own hands, and will submit them to no military conferences or conventions. Meantime you are to press to the utmost your military advantages."

But when Richmond fell and the principal insurgent army had surrendered, Lincoln, in his last public address, on April 11, 1865 did not fail to give Grant his just due. Said Lincoln:

"* * no part of the honor for plan or execution is mine. To General Grant, his skillful officers, and brave men, all belongs."

If Lincoln deserves credit for the military success of the northern armies it is certainly not because he, himself, was a military leader in the sense of Alexander the Great or Napoleon, but that with his infallible genius for judging men and his infinite patience and unconquerable determination, he forged this victory by employing the grand strategy of his tireless mind.

There are men in history who have been remembered because they were fired with an overpowering passion to bring freedom to their fellowmen. Yet it would be a mistake to be-

lieve that Abraham Lincoln, when elected to the Presidency, set out to destroy the institution of slavery in the United States. Even now he is seldom thought of as the Great Emancipator, although formerly he was pretentiously so designated. In the retrospect of years Lincoln's relation to emancipation appears in its true light. We need only refer to his own words in a letter written to Horace Greeley on August 22, 1862, to at once get to the heart of Lincoln's attitude on the question of slavery:

"Dear Sir:—I have just read yours of the 19th, addressed to myself through the New York Tribune. * *

"As to the policy I 'seem to be pursuing,' as you say, I have not meant to leave any one in doubt.

" * * My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it; and if I could do it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that. What I do about slavery and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save this Union; and what I forbear, I forbear because I do not believe it would help to save the Union. I shall do less whenever I shall believe what I am doing hurts the cause, and I shall do more whenever I shall believe doing more will help the cause. I shall try to correct errors when shown to be errors; and I shall adopt new views so fast as they shall appear to be true views. I have here stated my purpose according to my view of official duty, and I intend no modification of my oft-expressed personal wish that all men, everywhere, could be free."

In the following month (September 13, 1862) Lincoln made reply to a committee from the religious denominations of Chicago, who were requesting him to issue a Proclamation of Emancipation. He said:

" * * I am approached with the most opposite opinions and advice, and that by religious men, who are equally certain that they represent the Divine will. * * I hope it will not be irreverent for me to say that if it is probable that God would reveal his will to others, on a point so connected with my duty, it might be supposed he would reveal it directly to me; * *. These are not, however, the days of miracles, and I suppose it will be granted that I am not to expect a direct revelation. I must study the plain physical facts of the case, ascertain what is possible, and learn what appears to be wise and right."

A little later Lincoln determined that compensated emancipation, by payment for release of the slaves, might offer the solution. He urged the idea with earnest appeal to Congress on December 1, 1862 and concluded by saying:

"We, even we here, hold the power and bear the responsibility. In giving freedom to the slave we assure freedom to the free—honorable alike in what we give and what we preserve. We shall nobly save or meanly lose the last, best hope of earth. Other means may succeed; this could not fail. The way is plain, peaceful, generous, just—a way which if followed the world will forever applaud and God must forever bless."

When it at last appeared to Lincoln that military emancipation was justified as an indispensable step in saving the Union, he made no pretense that he had forseen or planned such an end.

Writing to A. G. Hodges on April 4, 1864 he expressed both his own feelings and his concept of duty. Said Lincoln:

" * * If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong. I cannot remember when I did not so think and feel, and yet I have never understood that the Presidency conferred upon me an unrestricted right to act officially upon this judgment and feeling. * * And I aver that, to this day, I have done no official act in mere de-

ference to my abstract judgment and feeling on slavery.

* * *

I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me. Now, at the end of three years' struggle, the nation's condition is not what either party, or any man, devised or expected. God alone can claim it. Whither it is tending seems plain. If God now wills the removal of a great wrong, and wills also that we of the North, as well as you of the South, shall pay fairly for our complicity in that wrong, impartial history will find therein new cause to attest and revere the justice and goodness of God."

It is clear to any student of history that Lincoln became the Great Emancipator only as a by-product of his fixed purpose of saving the Union. If he deserves credit as one who has loosened the bonds of human degradation, it is not because he undertook a crusade against slavery, but because while setting his face unyieldingly to the performance of what he regarded as his duty under the Constitution, he became the worthy means by which in the United States there was achieved his cherished personal hope for freedom for all mankind.

Some of the better known characters in history have fascinated us by their romantic careers. The lives of such men and women have always intrigued us with a sentimental abstraction. Yet of all figures in American history none is less romantic than Lincoln. A plainer man could not be envisioned. Plain, almost barren, surroundings were the heritage of his boyhood. Plain hard work amid plain people—this was the lot of his youth. Plain and humble was his measure of himself when on July 28, 1859 he wrote the Hon. Samuel Galloway:

" * * I fear you have formed an estimate of me which can scarcely be sustained on a personal acquaintance.

* * *

"I must say I do not think myself fit for the Presidency."

It would be difficult to imagine a less glamorous personality than honest Abe. Lincoln himself recognized this. In November 1863, in reference to certain published criticism, he said:

" * * These comments constitute a fair specimen of what has occurred to me through life. I have endured a great deal of ridicule, without much malice; and have received a great deal of kindness not quite free from ridicule. I am used to it."

While there is an element of the dramatic in the mere fact that such a plain personage became President, no one will ever recall Lincoln as a dashing hero of history. If there is anything romantic about the life of Abraham Lincoln, it is only in the glory of unremitting toil and in the adherence to the hard path of duty.

Some men have so personified the period of history in which they lived that they have become the living emblems of their times. They have come down to us in memory, as a theme song in which were blended the harmonies of their age. Such were Pericles of Greece and Augustus of Rome. But the era of Lincoln was an era of personal division and national dissention. Unanimity of thought or ideology was never less existent than in Lincoln's day.

An address on October 5, 1863 by Lincoln to a Committee, illustrates this fact:

"We are in a civil war. In such cases there always is a main question, but in this case that question is a perplexing compound—Union and slavery. It thus becomes a question not of two sides merely, but of at least four sides, even among those who are for the Union, saying nothing of those who are against it. Thus, those who are for the Union with, but not without slavery; those for it without, but not with; those for it with or without, but prefer it with; and those for it with or without, but prefer it without.

"Among these, again, is a subdivision of those who are for gradual, but not for immediate, and those who are for immediate, but not

for gradual extinction of slavery.

"It is easy to conceive that all these shades of opinion, and even more, may be sincerely entertained by honest and truthful men.

* * *

" * * From time to time I have done and said what appeared to me proper to do and say. * * It obliges nobody to follow me, and I trust it obliges me to follow nobody. The Radicals and Conservatives each agree with me in some things and disagree in others. I could wish both to agree with me in all things, for then they would agree with each other, and would be too strong for any foe from any quarter. They, however, choose to do otherwise; and I do not question their right. * * It is my duty to hear all, but at last I must, within my sphere, judge what to do and what to forbear."

Division was so great, even in the north, that Lincoln doubted that he would be reelected. Nor did his second election indicate a unanimity of thought. Responding to a serenade on November 10, 1864, following his reelection, Lincoln referred to the turmoil that existed. Said Lincoln:

"It has long been a grave question whether any government, not too strong for the liberties of its people, can be strong enough to maintain its existence in great emergencies.

" * * We cannot have free government without elections; and if the emergency could force us to forgo or postpone a national election, it might fairly claim to have already conquered and ruined us. The strife of the election is but human nature practically applied to the facts of the case. What has occurred in this case must ever recur in similar cases. Human nature will not change. In any future great national trial, compared with the men of this, we will have as weak and as strong, as silly and as wise, as bad and as good. Let us, therefore, study the incidents of this as philosophy to learn wisdom from, and none of them as wrongs to be revenged.

* * *

"May I ask those who have not differed with me to join with me in this same spirit towards those who have?"

Sometimes even a divided people rise in united action, quickened with one compelling determination. But there was no Pearl Harbor to solidify the men of Lincoln's day. Who can read the close of Lincoln's First Inaugural Address (March 4, 1861) without the foreboding that he was doomed to live in solitary confinement of thought, a lone symbol of unity amid a confused and disunited people? You recall his well remembered words:

"In your hands, my dissatisfied fellow-countrymen, and not in mine, is the momentous issue of civil war. The government will not assail you. You can have no conflict without being yourselves the aggressors. You have no oath registered in heaven to destroy the government, while I shall have the most solemn one to 'preserve, protect, and defend' it.

"I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break, our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battle-field and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."

If Abraham Liincoln represented the period in which he lived, it certainly is not because he reflected the sectionalism of his times, but only in the sense that within him reposed an understanding of all the conflicts of violent partisanship, and that like a benevolent father of many and diverse children, he was the influence destined to reunite the recalcitrant and unyielding minds and passions of the men and women of his day.

Is it not strange that the greatest nation on earth has chosen as its greatest hero a man who was famed neither for his military genius, nor for a zealous espousal of anti-slavery, nor for

his romantic life, nor because he typified the age in which he lived? In the light of the reasons which have made many heroes, must we reach the conclusion that there is no rational cause to remember Lincoln? Is it mere happenstance or whim that has built the shrine to his memory?

Lincoln has been dissected as probably no other man in American history. Every scrap of paper that he wrote, every action that he took of which a scintilla of evidence has been found, has been recorded and studied and analyzed.

You can read his every written word, and examine his every known act. In them is revealed disappointment and frustration, but never cynicism or despair. In all, you see endless patience, unyielding perseverance, enduring faith. Everywhere you find humility, simplicity, directness. Nowhere do you discover self-aggrandizement, self-delusion or selfishness.

Lincoln was of the people, and even as he reflected their pain and toil, so he voiced their yearnings and aspirations. You remember his words at Gettysburg: "that these dead shall not have died in vain." And you recall the unforgettable sentiments expressed in his Second Inaugural Address:

"With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right * *."

Why do we remember Lincoln? Because he is the common man whose life epitomizes the fulfillment of epic hope, the triumph of human righteousness against overwhelming odds. Because, on the long road from an obscure cabin to the White House, he exemplified the nobility of humanity and the ideals of democracy. Because in viewing his life all Americans find new reason for courage, for hope, for achievement. Abraham Lincoln lives today; and his memory will remain a blessing to the American people in every generation, so long as they shall seek, as he sought, to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God.

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